

90 minutes *in* paradise

Text & Photos: Matt Harris

Miller and I were laughing hard as we loaded the groaning old shopping trolley to the brim with slabs of “Baltika”, Western Russia’s lager of choice. One more case and the thing would surely collapse.

And we hadn’t even started piling on the vodka.

Or the food...

We were standing in a supermarket in central Murmansk, and we had every reason to be laughing. We were stocking up for the kind of adventure that salmon anglers only dare to dream about.

Justin Miller - “Miller” to his friends - works for “The Fly Shop” in California, one of the most experienced fly-fishing outfitters in the US.

The Fly Shop had been invited to explore and evaluate the waters of the newly appointed Kola Reserve, along with a few other lucky souls. The Reserve comprises the Lumbovka and Kachkovka, two pristine salmon rivers that tumble off of the uttermost north-eastern corner of Russia’s Kola Peninsula, high up in the arctic circle. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union other rivers of the Kola have become household names in the salmon-fishing community, yet these two especially remote rivers seemed to have been quietly forgotten. Even die-hard Kola pioneers seemed oblivious when I asked around. Mike Michalak, the owner of The Fly Shop had chosen Justin and I to represent The Fly Shop on the exploratory, and we were hugely excited.

Why wouldn’t we be? The Lumbovka and Kachkovka truly are in ‘tiger’ country. Sandwiched between the mighty Yokanga and the impossibly prolific Ponoï, the two rivers could not be in a better place in salmon fishing terms.

As a veteran of the Kola, I was intrigued to see these two hidden gems that had stayed under the radar for so long. Sitting on the big Mi8 as we sped over the icy tundra, I looked around at the grinning faces, sharing round the whisky and pressing noses to the window. It was a great group. Along with Miller, there were two other good friends of mine, “Flyfishing

Nation” founder Stephan Dombaj and his right-hand man Paolo Hoffman, affectionately known as ‘ze Germans’, both great company, brilliant anglers and rising stars in the Flyfishing Media industry. There were also three new friends, Tobias Park - disarmingly warm, direct and impossible not to like, Eric Nerland, brooding, intense and infectiousy passionate about our great sport, and Greg Hegel, the young film cameraman charged with recording our adventure, and who’s company I came to enjoy immensely.

As the big Mi-8 helicopter wheeled over the river, I gazed down at the Lumbovka and what could well become one of the Kola’s most celebrated salmon pools. A glassy, boulder-studded

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gem that just screamed “big fish”. The thought of hitching a big sunray shadow across its tail was almost too much to bear, and as we stumbled out of the helicopter and straight into our waders, there was a feeling that we were pioneers in a very special place.

Our host was Gleb Zhukov, a bright and instantly likeable young Russian, whose father Yuri had acquired the fishing on the two rivers and set up The Kola Reserve. Gleb had been charged with overseeing the development of the fishery, and was keen to know what we thought.

Over the next few days, we experienced some utterly sensational fishing. Both rivers are stunningly beautiful and offer seemingly endless

miles of perfect fly water.

Gleb looked on as we raced from pool to pool, catching a succession of big, beautiful, chrome-bright salmon to exactly thirty pounds (landed by Paolo) and almost pinching ourselves at our luck. I fished a sunray shadow on a full floating line almost exclusively and experienced astonishing fishing, as the aggressive Russian fish exploded enthusiastically through the surface to smash the fly. Gleb appeared almost bemused by our feverish excitement, and as we shared a pot of black tea by the fire, Justin and I quickly realised the reason why. Although he had caught the odd salmon with a spinning rod, Gleb had never caught a salmon on the fly.

We immediately made it our solemn

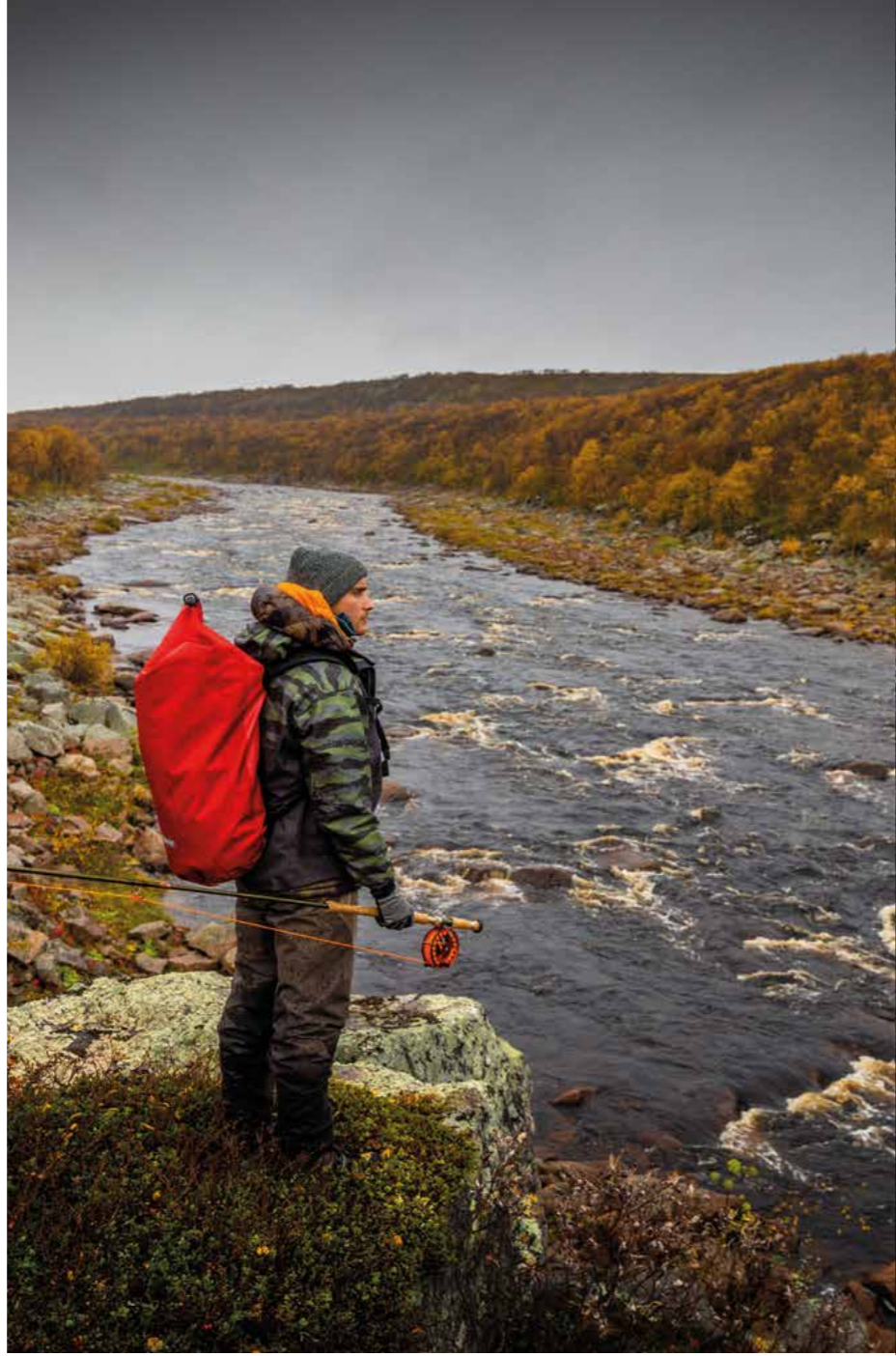
mission to rectify the situation.

Firstly, we got Gleb casting.

Modern Skagit lines are not the prettiest way to present a Salmon fly, but they do allow even a real novice to get into the game. The Lumbovka is not a huge river, and Gleb was soon covering enough of it to be in with a real chance.

Sure enough, as Justin and I looked on, Gleb was suddenly into a fish. As Justin wrestled the salmon onto the grass, I captured a perfect moment, as Gleb turned smiling to the camera with the disarmingly pride and fervour of a man who has just caught his first salmon on fly.

Then, disaster! The fish twisted out of Miller’s grasp and was gone.



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Oh well, we'd just have to catch another one.

On the Lumbovka, that wasn't going to prove difficult, and an hour later, I captured another special moment with my camera, as Gleb proudly lifted his second salmon on fly briefly up for the camera before watching it swim powerfully away.

That day, a true salmon fisherman was born.

Gleb, previously a slightly baffled onlooker, was now every bit as addicted as the rest of us, and we found ourselves having to shout repeatedly to him to make that his last cast as the helicopter pick-up was imminent.

Those special days passed in a blur. I remember one day in particular, when the helicopter couldn't fly due to a very low cloud base, and Greg and I went on an epic trek downstream.

I caught five beautiful fish that day, but the last one had me thinking. While the rest had been paint-fresh

and chrome-bright, this one was different. It sparkled silver for sure, but it was flushed with a subtle magenta hue, and its head was a little dark.

It was an Osenka.

Osenkas are the fall-run salmon of the Kola. These remarkable fish come into the rivers in the autumn and stay under the ice through the long black winter before spawning the following autumn, one full year after they enter the river. They sometimes return to the estuary in the intervening spring, where they often silver up, and thus appear to the uninitiated to be fresh-run.

Remarkably, having spawned, the fish then stay under the ice for another winter before returning to the ocean the following spring. Thus, Osenkas survive for over eighteen months in the river without feeding, and they have to be packed full of fat and muscle to see them through their epic ordeal.

Needless to say, when they first

come into the river, that makes them a real handful.

I sat up that night with the rest of the group and we reviewed images of other fish that we'd had caught. There was no doubt. Both the Lumbovka and Kachkovka clearly had an Osenka run.

The legendary Ponoï, the Kola's quintessential "Osenka" fishery is just a few short miles to the south of the Kachkovka, and suddenly the possibilities had us wide-eyed and jabbering with excitement.

I was due to leave the following day, heading to my beloved Yokanga just a little way down the coast, but we agreed to meet in London to plan an autumn exploration, to figure out what the Kola Reserve could offer in terms of Osenka fishing.

Justin was committed to guiding in Kamchatka, but in late September, a slimmed-down team of Stephan, Paolo, Greg and I returned to assess the potential for autumn fishing.

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Initially, the portents were not good. Peering down from the chopper as we flew back in, we were greeted by depressingly high water. Summer on the Kola had been unusually wet and cold, and the rivers were further swollen with the first heavy rains of the autumn.

Online reports for our neighbours on the Ponoï showed that it too was experiencing high water conditions, and catches were remarkably low for such a prolific river.

Notwithstanding, we set about our task with gusto. After we had spent a few days pulling a few strong but stale fish from the Lumbovka, Yuri arrived.

Yuri is great company - a friendly, genial man, and a passionate fisherman. He greeted us warmly and after treating us to a delicious supper featuring some intriguing Russian delicacies including Horseradish vodka and canned bear and beaver meat, he whisked us off to the Lower Kachkovka in his gleaming,

That day, a true salmon fisherman was born.

state-of-the-art Eurocopter. I glimpsed the lower river for the first time, and it was a revelation. Rushing out of a spectacular canyon, we looked down on a series of perfect pools that just begged to be fished with a fly.

It was here on the Lower Kachkovka that we finally found the magical silver treasure we had been looking for.

I was the first to pull out an Osenka, sleek, silver and stunningly beautiful. I added a second, and Steph and Paolo soon followed suit. Then Yuri nearly stole the show with a big brute estimated at over twenty pounds, which sadly threw

the hook right at the net.

The fishing was exhilarating. That evening, after catching our first Osenkas on the Kachkovka, we naturally had a few drinks to celebrate.

In some cases, maybe more than a few.

The next morning, I had a raging hang-over. While Steph and Paolo guided Yuri through the same lovely pool that had produced the bulk of our fish the day before, I took a half-mile walk upstream to explore, and to clear my head. I stumbled over a boulder field and across a small stream and then, suddenly there it was: perhaps the most stunningly beautiful salmon pool I've ever seen. The Kachkovka had dropped and cleared after the previous day's rare and extended period of sunshine, and I was looking at a lively bubbling neck that resolved into a gleaming, foam-flecked pool with a long, boulder-studded tail that simply HAD to hold fish.

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My hangover started to clear as I fumbled on my favourite “Bobby Clarkson” fly, and was gone completely when, three casts later, that same fly was arrested way out in the frigid currents of the Kachkovka by one of those elusive Osenkas. Perhaps fourteen pounds of solid silver magic suddenly clambered up into the golden autumn light and cartwheeled in the sunshine before dancing off down the pool in a blur. It was a moment of unalloyed salmon-fishing perfection that will stay with me for as long as I live.

The fish was immaculate in every way: a sparkling blue-silver hen with every iridescent scale in place. Two long-tailed lice were clinging to her back, and I knew the fish had been in the wilds of the Arctic Ocean only hours - perhaps minutes before. I gently prized out the barbless hook and gazed at her for a few short moments. She was a captivating sight. There is simply no fish on earth more beautiful than a fresh Atlantic salmon, and the thick-set Osenkas of the Kachkovka are especially bewitching. I watched the salmon gather herself in the icy current before breaking through my fingers to rocket back into the river in an explosion of icy spray.

My hands were shaking, and not from the excessive consumption of vodka the previous evening.

The next ninety minutes were one of the most unforgettable experiences of my fly-fishing life. In that time, I caught no fewer than six of these stunning fish. Each cast was full of expectation, and unlike most salmon takes, that shake you out of your reverie after long hours or even days of nothing, I was not hoping for, but actually expecting a fish. It was a rare and special feeling, to KNOW the grab was coming, and to be able to really savour that precious, quintessential moment when the loop of running line slips smartly up through your fingers and the reel starts to sizzle.

After three fish, I knew had to alert the boys downstream to share the

silver treasure trove that I'd stumbled upon, and to get some pictures of these exquisite fish.

Well, perhaps just one more I thought...

Having beached my fourth, I did the right thing. In my post-party stupor, I'd forgotten my radio, so I employed our agreed Plan B, and fired a Bear Banger skyward, sending a big bright Roman candle of acid green light cascading into the autumn sky.

Downstream, Yuri was into a fish, and when it was landed, the lads took great care to photograph our friend and patron's first Osenka for posterity. So it was that by the time Paolo came running upstream to see what the fuss was about, I'd managed to land a fifth, lose another, and was now wrestling my sixth fish onto the bank. It was the only one that wasn't chrome fresh and dripping with lice.

Paolo helped photograph the fish and by way of a “thank you” I bit my fly off and put it in his hand before walking him up to the top of the run. Satisfied he was all set, I ran back for my camera. Action shots were guaranteed, I thought.

But nothing.

Paolo fished through the pool beautifully but not a pull.

It was only when I got in behind him that I knew in an instant what was wrong. The river was rising again, and the pool was now uncomfortably fast and starting to boil up.

The show was over.

But what a show.

There are few times when an angler is privileged to fish a virtually virgin fly-fishery.

It has happened to me a handful of times:

Cosmoledo in the Seychelles, Cayo Cruz in Cuba, and a few other remote spots from Labrador to Mongolia spring to mind. Now I believe that I can add the magical waters of the Lumbovka and Kachkovka to my list.

Many people have asked me to characterise the rivers:

Well, both are classic Kola streams, but are more intimate and manageable than some of their bigger neighbours. Both offer lively water, with a heavy tannin stain, roughhouse boulder-fields and savage rapids. The fish are hefty, deep-bodied salmon that fight like tigers.

On the larger Lumbovka, the summer fishing provided numerous twenty pounders, and a thirty pounder is clearly a real possibility. The river may also have a viable Osenka fishery but it is as yet unproven.

The Kachkovka is a smaller river and flows for much of its lower part through a deep but at least partly accessible canyon. It provided great summer fishing and may be the only small river on the Kola with a really strong Osenka run. To experience these fish whilst wading in the autumn sunshine is a very special experience.

It would be easy to make comparisons with the other great rivers of the Kola, but in truth, both rivers are unique, with a magic and an allure that is all their own.

It will take decades to fully unlock their secrets, but what an exciting challenge that promises to be.

The Kola Reserve will be open for business next year, and I am hugely excited about its prospects. The adventure is really just beginning. ●

Contacts

If you are interested in joining Matt Harris on a hosted trip or want to register your interest, contact Matt at: mattharris@mattharris.com

The Fly Shop will be representing The Kola Reserve. Talk to Justin Miller at: justin@theflyshop.com

You can learn more about The Kola Reserve at: www.kola-reserve.com/

